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### DEVELOPMENTS AND TRENDS IN MALAYSIAN RURAL MEDIA

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Development of the rural media in Malaysia, especially in the Peninsular has not been encouraging. This is a sad state of affair considering that about 60 per cent or 10 million of Malaysia 17.1 million population still dwell in rural areas. Also, since independence the biggest allocation of the national budget have nearly always been for rural development. Yet after more than 30 years of independence, the rural media in Malaysia has yet to make an impact or gain its proper place in nation building and rural development.

Also, this is despite the fact that Malaysian leaders have long perceive the country's mass media in what might be termed the classical role for mass media in developing nations. Newell Grenfell observed this in his book *Switch On: Switch Off* (1979).

In its white paper entitled "Towards Preserving National Security" in *Kertas Perintah 14 Tahun 1988* presented to the Malaysian Parliament, the government acknowledge the power of the newspapers. It stated that "Newspapers play a very important role in society by among other things providing news and comments, and publishing readers' views on certain subjects. Newspapers also have a big influence in the formation of public opinion. Those who own newspapers and their editorial management can play this role in various ways." However, despite this expectation of the government, the mass media in Malaysia have not really gone as rural as expected if it is to play their role more effectively in nation building.

A major reason for this unhappy situation is that the modern mass media in Malaysia is basically urban centered and oriented. Also, the modern mass media tradition in Malaysia, as with most developing nations is a relatively recent phenomenon.

The Malaysian mass media, especially in the Peninsular being urban-centred, closely reflected the patterns of the British colonial interests and administration. The print media, for example, emerged primarily to serve the commercial interests as well as the urban elites.

Also, the print media came to being to serve communal interests. The year 1805 saw the publication of the first English language newspaper in Penang. Known as *The Prince of Wales*

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*Island Gazette* (1805-1827) it served British interests in Malaya, particularly the communities in the Straits Settlements (Khoo, 1988). The first Chinese newspaper, *Chinese Monthly Magazine* was published in Melaka by William Milne, a missionary who worked for the London Missionary Society. The Society published the Chinese newspaper to propagate its religious activity in mainland China (Tang, 1988). The Malay and Indian communities were relatively late in publishing their own vernacular newspapers. The first Malay bulletin, *Jawi Peranakan* first appeared in 1876. In the same year, the first Indian bulletin in Malaysia, *Tangai Sinagan* was also published. The ethnic clientele of such newspapers, created a demand for, and consequently encouraged reportage of features and news items of ethnic interest. Thus the economics of publication itself propagated a structure of coverage which was heavily biased towards ethnic needs and concerns. This happened in spite of the fact that the three vernacular bulletins were published in Penang and Singapore, were relatively cosmopolitan and British in outlook (Arabi & Latiffah, 1988).

Also, it must be mentioned that before the Second World War newspapers existed in some larger towns of the Peninsular. For example, an English newspaper was established in Ipoh before the Second World War and during the war Japanese propaganda newspapers also being published in Ipoh. Immediately after the war an English newspaper was still surviving in Ipoh. However, these newspapers serving the local community ceased to exist after the Federal system in British Malaya became more centralised and Kuala Lumpur became the capital.

### **Mass Media in Malaysia**

Malaysia's mass media systems is a mixture of government and private-enterprises. In order to be able to publish a newspaper or magazines one must get a permit to do so. The permit can be applied from the Ministry of Home Affairs. Publishers must seek for new permit at the end of every year. It is not an automatic renewal. As for operating a television station, so far only one company has been given the licence to do so. Up to now there is no private radio station. Licence to operate the electronic media can be applied to the Ministry of Information.

To ensure that the rural people are served effectively by radio, the Malaysian government has established a number of radio stations in the rural areas. Besides programmes on national airtime, Radio Malaysia also broadcasts local programmes from its regional stations in Penang, Ipoh, Kota Bahru, Kuala Terengganu, Kuantan, Johor Bahru, Melaka, Alor Setar, Kota Kinabalu, Kuching, Limbang, Sibul, Miri and Sri Aman.

RTM launched its regional station for the Federal Territory of Labuan on August 31, 1986.

The government local radio stations are encouraged to produce local programmes and sometimes using the dialects of the main population of the particular area to ensure it meet the needs of the intended listeners. Subjects of the local programmes usually relates to the agricultural activities or the type of occupations that involved the majority of local population. Television Malaysia though based in Kuala Lumpur, the nation's capital city does produce programmes meant for rural areas. These are seen in programmes like the locally produced agriculture segments. Islamic study and the like that are meant to attract and educate the rural audiences. Also, the Television Malaysia stations in Sabah and Sarawak are encouraged to produce their own local programmes which include magazine type programmes, dramas and musicals.

On the other hand, the government has allowed a television station popularly known as TV3 to operate as a private enterprise and strongly competing for audiences and advertisements against its own two television channels. Privatisation of television came about in 1984. It emerged as a result of the Malaysia incorporation move. By its very nature of being a commercial creature, TV3 is urban centred and oriented to where its lifeblood is, the city and town folks as well as the advertising industry.

As for the print media in Malaysia, there are currently thirty-five daily newspapers: 20 in Mandarin, 3 in Bahasa Malaysia, 8 in English and 3 in Tamil.

All the national newspapers are published in Kuala Lumpur, the nation's capital. Only in the state of Sabah and Sarawak are newspapers published in its state capitals and other major towns.

In Peninsular Malaysia regional newspapers never seem to prosper. This experiences have discourage entrepreneurs to set up rural press or community newspapers. For example, national newspaper organisations that have established regional newspapers like *Bintang Timur* in Penang for Utusan Group and *Warta Tebrau* in Johor for the New Straits Times Group have found their venture unprofitable and were forced to terminate their publications. Both of the newspapers have been in Bahasa Malaysia to cater to the needs of the majority of the rural people. Conversely, *The Star* an English newspaper that began life as a provincial paper in Penang become a big success after turning national. Another, English newspaper, *The Echo* also originating in Penang, however, was not that lucky. It was surviving well enough as a provincial newspaper for the northern zone of Peninsular Malaysia until it became *The National Echo* moving its headquarters to Kuala Lumpur and quickly became insolvent.

Nevertheless, currently, the major national newspaper organisations like the New Straits Times Group, Utusan Melayu Group and The Star are publishing their newspapers to cater for regional and the rural people needs. For example, the New Straits Times Group published a northern edition, an eastern edition, a central edition as well as a Sabah and Sarawak edition. Each of these regional edition place special emphasise on the news of the particular region it is intended for. The slant or angle of the stories is also geared to the need of the region concerned.

This development and trend in Peninsular Malaysia is expected to discourage the birth and growth of rural print mass media which have it roots in the rural areas. The adequate communication infrastructure in the Peninsular would also provide the same effect.

As for Sabah and Sarawak, their inadequate communication infrastructure is believed to be one of the most important factor contributing to the birth and nurture of their rural print media. This is despite the fact that the literacy level in Sarawak and Sabah is much lower than the Peninsular. However, with the rapid increase of literacy in the two states the number of people reading newspapers is also expected to rise.

#### **The Rural Print Mass Media in Malaysia**

As stated the rural print mass media in Malaysia are basically located in Sarawak and Sabah.

Sarawak has 12 newspapers, one in the local languages (Utusan Sarawak), one in Bahasa and English (The Borneo Post), two in English and the rest in Chinese (see table 1) published by the private sectors. Malaysia's Information Department in Sarawak also produce four bulletins, two in Bahasa Malaysia, a monthly and a bi weekly and two in Iban (the biggest ethnic group), a monthly and a weekly.

Sabah has nine newspapers. Three of the newspapers are published in three languages - Bahasa Malaysia, English and Kadazan (language of the largest ethnic group in Sabah) while the rest are in Chinese.

It is observed that the Chinese language newspapers are more in terms of numbers as compared to the other languages newspapers are linked to the Chinese interest in commerce and their tradition of giving importance to education. Therefore, it is of no surprise that a number of the Chinese newspapers are located in the other major towns of Sarawak and Sabah where they are of the majority and where most of them are involved in business.

In term of contents, there is not much difference between the various newspapers. Generally, they give emphasis on local news, followed by national news and ASEAN news and finally the world news. Also, the local newspapers do give importance to business news, especially if it has bearings on the local population. The same goes for agricultural news, especially if it touches on the produce of the local inhabitants.

Somehow, some of the newspapers are seen as "taking sides". They can be seen as pro government or the ruling party, pro oppositions and neutral. These allegations of the Sarawak and Sabah newspapers taking sides are seen from the slants of their coverages and their ownerships.

This state of affair occurs because even though newspaper industry is generally a business concerns in Malaysia, political parties or individuals with strong political motivations or connections have been known to own newspaper companies or have a big share in the companies assets. For example, the youngest daily in Sabah, *Borneo Mail* is reported to be own by the current ruling party or someone very close to the party. As such, the news content are very much in favour of the current state government.

In Sarawak, one of the local newspaper that has been labelled as pro oppositions has been reported to have been bought over by individuals who are pro the current state government.

However, regardless of ownerships, newspapers in Malaysia, urban or rural have been judged as generally having a liberal policy. This mean, that newspapers in the country have generally tried to be fair to all parties involved by giving coverage to all considered newsworthy. This is so even for giving coverage to the underdogs, the lower income groups, the under privilege, rural people, etc.

#### a. *Economic Viability of the Rural Media*

In terms of circulation the rural newspapers in Sabah and Sarawak range from 3000 to nearly 39,000 copies sold daily. Sarawak newspapers, however, have a higher circulation than the Sabah newspapers. The highest circulation in Sarawak is nearly 39,000 while in Sabah its only nearly 16,000 copies daily.

In Sarawak, the newspaper that has the most circulation is a Chinese daily based in Sibu an average size town about five hours by boat from the state capital. The daily entitle *See Hua Daily News* has three editions published in three regional towns of Sarawak and has a total daily circulation of 38,700 copies. The second biggest selling newspapers in Sarawak is an English daily, the *Borneo Post* with a circulation of 28,000.

In Sabah also the largest selling publications is a Chinese paper called *Asia Times*. It has a circulation of about 16,000 copies. The second most sold publication is a daily, *Daily Express* a newspaper published in three languages (Bahasa Malaysia, English and Kadazan) and having a circulation of about 15,000 copies.

The prices of the rural print media range from 30 cents Malaysian to 70 cents Malaysian a copy. Somehow, the Chinese daily is more expensive per copy than for the other languages. For example, the *See Hua Daily News* in Chinese is selling for 70 cents a copy while the *People Mirror* in English sells for 30 cents a copy while the *Sarawak Tribune* also in English is selling for 40 cents a copy.

All the rural publications carry advertisements. The amount of advertisements vary from one newspapers to the next. However, it is observed that the newspapers located in the larger towns do carry more advertisements.

To ensure that their publishing business is in good financial position, the rural publishers do seek out printing jobs from other business people in terms of publishing their occasional publications, calendars, business cards, greeting cards and other miscellenous.

#### b) *Professionalism of the Rural Media/Management*

In terms of ownerships the rural media are owned by individuals, family, political party, etc. Many of the smaller publishing company, especially for the Chinese publications, are usually owned and managed by family businesses.

However, the trend seems that as a publishing company expanded there is a tendency for it going public and influential personalities or representatives of certain political parties trying to obtain a substantial share in it.

Much can still be done to improve the professionalism of the rural media management. For now, most of the managers and proprietors are self-made people. Hiring are conducted base on the experience of the potential employees in relevant field. In certain cases, children of the proprietors have managed to secure relevant qualifications and training and being asked to manage the family business.

In term of editorial staff, also, much can be done to improve their level of competency and professionalism. All the participants of a five day workshop in "Training for Rural Journalists" conducted by the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre together with local or national press institute in Sabah and Sarawak admitted that they certainly needed training. Nearly all of them have no formal training in journalism. They also admitted that their management or chief editors were self-made people. The participants felt that their superiors themselves need training, especially in the running of a newspaper company.

#### c) *Adoption of New Technology*

In terms of adopting new technology the rural media is generally slow in doing so. This is more connected to its costs than actually being ignorant about it. Most of the rural media company are not that well of and many are barely surviving. However, being more expose to the world because of their responsibilities as media people the publishers are generally aware of the development in the communication world. Their regrets are that they cannot afford it. Also, a number said that they are waiting for the price to drop lower or more affordable to them.

Nevertheless, a few of the larger publishers in Sabah and Sarawak are beginning to buy personal computers and other newer computerised equipments. Those who have began to adopt the new technology are beginning to gain the upper hand over their competitors and finding it indispensable. However they also have to work harder to justify the cost and



maintainence. They are seeking to do other publications or other related businesses rather than just depending on the publications of their newspapers.

d) *Public Access to and Participation in the Rural Media*

In term of radio stationned in rural areas the public access and participation to it is rather good. Personnels in these radio stations are encouraged to involve the people in their various programmes, especially in voicing their problems. In fact in many of these radio stations there are talk back programmes where people can voice their problems over the telephones. However, this is limited only to people who have telephones or have public telephones installed in their villages.

Nevertheless, journalists in these radio stations are encouraged to go out and meet the people and gives relevant coverage to happenings in rural areas.

As for the print media in the rural areas, the public access to participation to it can also be very much improved. However, the rural media is not to be solely blamed for the situation. As participants for the workshops on "Training for Rural Journalists" lamented the communication infrastructure are not very adequate. They themselves find it very difficult to reach these people. In Sarawak for example, journalists are only able to reach some rural areas only with the assistance of the Department of Information personnels who are kind enough to accomodate them in their transports when the situation arises.

Stringers who stay in the rural areas also complained about the difficulty to send news fast when required and their news normally become "stale" by the time it reaches the relevant editors. Also, they complained about the attitudes of editors towards rural news. Editors, they said, do not give priorities to rural news and frequently used it only as fillers. Editors also complained about the quality of news sent to them by their stringers or rural journalists. Further, it seems, the rural areas only get mass media coverage when something tragic or unusual occurs, and especially when ministers or other important dignataries visited it.

**Reaching the Rural People**

As had been said before, a number of studies had shown that Malaysian including those in rural areas are reasonably exposed to mass media. A sample survey in 1973 among farmers in Peninsular Malaysia revealed that only 18 percent of them did not read newspapers. It was also discovered that 82 percent of the farmers listened to rural broadcasts over radio.

Another survey conducted in 1982 among farmers in Sabah showed that they obtained their initial information about a National Unit Trust launched especially for the indogenous people through radio, television, newspapers, government information officers or mobile units of the Information Department, friends and their own children. Television was the commonest means of information. About 70 percent of them first heard about the Trust scheme from television.

Further, a 1987 survey of 1,000 respondents in two eastern states of Peninsular Malaysia (Terengganu and Kelantan) which are mainly rural revealed that television is the most credible mass media. This study by mass communication students of the Institut Teknologi MARA showed that about 70 percent of them felt so. Somehow they felt that it is easier to believe what can be heard and seen rather than just through reading or listening. It probably also reflect their level of education. Further, the rural people may be better able to associate

with television because their traditional media are also verbal and visual in nature.

Hence, important though mass media as source of information and change agents in rural areas, Malaysia has also been using folk media or traditional communication as means of reaching people outside urban areas. Since early 1970s, Malaysia Information Department has been employing folk media to communicate development and other messages to rural audiences. It has sent out troupes to present the classic Ramayana figures of "Wayang Kulit" (shadow play) to rural people with themes of anti-communism, Malaysia's Economic Policy, the Five-Year Plans, hazards of taking narcotics, family development and others. 'Boria' and 'Dikir Barat' two forms of Malaysian traditional music for example are also utilised to support government campaigns and spread desirable innovations. It was reported that a boria song urging the use of a new strain of rice was at one time among the most popular song in the country.

The Malaysian Information Ministry also occasionally hires Chinese drama troupes to perform skits which include government messages couched in humorous dialogues. With regard to this approach, senior information officers have attested to its effectiveness in livening up a dry topic like tenant registration. Information Department officers normally write the scripts for skits explaining the necessity to register all residents, using a buffon-like character who cannot grasp the reasons behind voter registrations and a wise person who tries to explain to him. Such skits are interspersed in variety programmes featuring singing and dancing by local youth organisations.

However, it should also be noted that the Malaysian government has yet to fully utilise the various forms of traditional media in the country. For example, Derwent Kell in his book *A Doctor's Borneo* described a form of folk media that has yet to be utilised. Kell wrote (1985: 57)

"Suburban type newspapers flourished in the jungle. Signs called "tatandu" were set up typically near the intersanction of native paths. These tatandu consisted of small branches marked appropriately and stuck in the ground. A few bones tied together and hung of the tatandu clearly indicated the nature of the last meal eaten by the Murut travellers. If a hunter had killed a deer he hung a forked branch resembling deer horns on the tatandu; if a python, a coil of rattan; if a pig, a broken stick bent acutely and with the bark sliced off each end, this representing a pig's lower jaw. Direction of travel was indicated by the inclination of the tatandu, a return journey by breaking the top of the tatandu over backwards. Often we stopped at the intersection of jungle paths and had someone read to us the latest jungle news as recorded in the tatandu.

Supporting the traditional media and the mass media, Malaysia's Information Department continues to utilise interpersonal communication as the main technique in carrying out its activities to reach the rural folks. It employs various communication tools and strategies such as public addresses, group discussions, civic activities, film shows, publications and exhibitions to help the rural folk to understand and accept the role they are expected to play in achieving the objectives of national integration, security and development. Hence, any campaigns by the Department of Information to reach the rural people will be supported by films and slide shows, exhibitions, hoardings, banners, the distribution of publications such

as booklets, folders, posters, relating to these policies and by the performances of the Pentarama (an abbreviation of the words "penerangan" (information), "tarian" (dance) and "drama" (drama)). The Department's three Pentarama units employ entertainment media such as songs, dances and drama in its stage shows to convey its message to the people. These troupes tour the country, attracting large audiences, drawn from various ethnic groups. (Mohd. Kaus, 1986 : 80).

Here, it is also appropriate to note the acceptance of the mass media, especially the print media in the rural areas. Supriya Singh who stayed in a village for an advanced degree field work made some interesting observations. Supriya wrote (1984: 30).

"The only time I saw anybody excited over a newspaper was when the brother-in-law of one of the kampong people was involved in a stabbing case in Kota Kinabalu, the capital state of Sabah. The report of the local paper was read again and again by those who can read. All the relevant details were repeated for those around who could not read - the age of the boy, the age of the girl, the number of stab wounds, other possible injuries. After the report had been read, the paper was passed around and the photographs were scrutinized. Everything was noted - the height of the building, the position of the boy, how his eyes were open, his arm lying under the body, how there were cushions on the floor. Then the children looked at it. It was a neighbourhood happening. What is relevant here is the price of timber, the amount of royalty to be paid, who has land and who is selling it, whose wife has run away - this is the news.

## Conclusion

Obviously much could be done to improve the rural media in Malaysia as well as the effort to reach the rural folks. However, it must be noted that the traditional media are fairly utilised and that the latest communication technology are employed whenever possible. In fact the Malaysian government seemed to have a penchant for the newest communication technology in its effort to reach her rural citizens. Nevertheless, it is heartening to note that in reaching the rural folks interpersonal communication are being given due consideration.

As for the print media, especially newspapers more effort should be geared towards truly establishing a rural press. For now the rural press in Malaysia is still being urban oriented. News from rural areas and information that are useful to rural folks are still negligible. Also, it can be seen that a substantial portion of rural newspapers contents are from BERNAMA (Malaysia National News Agency) stories. This is especially so for the smaller newspapers. In fact one of BERNAMA's functions was to assist in the growth of local newspapers by providing them with news that are otherwise beyond their small scale of operations. By providing these local newspapers with national and international news as well as local news at a much scaled down price it has helped to make them more competitive and healthy. Even though BERNAMA now has the monopoly of distributing international news in Malaysia, it must remember that it is the rural folks that are the soul of the nation and also they are the people that are needed to be informed as well as mobilised towards a speedy nation building and development.



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## Appendix A

### PRICE AND CIRCULATION OF NEWSPAPERS IN SARAWAK - 1988

Local Newspapers:	Cost Per Copy		Daily Circulation
	Daily	Monthly	
<b>Local Language</b>			
Utusan Sarawak	30 cents	\$2.40	3,000 copies (twice weekly)
<b>English Language</b>			
Sarawak Tribune	40 cents	\$10.50	19,500 copies
Borneo Post (Kuching Ed.)	40 cents	\$14.00	28,000 copies
" " (Sibu Ed.)	60 cents	\$16.00	(inclusive above)
" " (Miri Ed.)	60 cents	\$16.00	( " " )
People's Mirror	30 cents	\$09.00	10 copies
<b>Chinese Language</b>			
See Hua Daily News (Kuching ed.)	70 cents	\$18.00	38,700 copies
(Sibu Eds.)	70 cents	\$18.00	(inc. above)
(Miri Eds.)	70 cents	\$18.00	(inc. above)
International Times	50 cents	\$14.00	22,000 copies
Sin Wan Pao (Special Ed.)	40 cents	\$10.00	08,000 copies
Berita Petang (Afternoon News)	40 cents	\$12.00	08,500 copies
Chinese Daily News	40 cents	\$10.00	06,000 copies
Miri Daily News	60 cents	\$16.00	14,000 copies
Malaysia Daily News	60 cents	\$15.00	15,000 copies
See Hua Weekly (given free with See Hua Daily)			

### National Newspapers

New Straits Times (English)	60 cents	\$24.00	04,000 copies
Berita Harian (Bahasa)	60 cents	\$24.00	05,500 copies
Berita Minggu (Bahasa)	85 cents	N/A	05,900 copies
Utusan Malaysia (Bahasa)	65 cents	\$24.00	01,000 copies
Mingguan Malaysia (Bahasa)	85 cents	N/A	01,000 copies
Malay Mail (English)	55 cents	N/A	00,100 copies
Nanyang Siang Pau (Chinese)	70 cents	\$22.00	06,000 copies
Sin Chew Jit Poa (Chinese)	70 cents	\$24.00	00,800 copies
Star (English)	60 cents	\$24.00	N/A

### NEWSPAPERS AND NEWSLETTERS PUBLISHED BY THE INFORMATION DEPARTMENT IN SARAWAK

#### Bahasa Malaysia

Pedoman Rakyat (monthly)	30,000 copies
Pedoman Masyarakat (twice monthly)	06,000 copies

#### Iban Language

Pemberita (monthly)	06,500 copies
Karang Seminggu (weekly)	03,000 copies

N.B. Information Department publications are generally distributed free or sold at very low prices

SOURCES: *Department of Information Malaysia, Sarawak.*

### Appendix B

#### NEWSPAPERS IN SABAH

<i>Name of Newspaper</i>	<i>Publisher</i>	<i>Daily Circulation</i>
1. Daily Express (in English, Bahasa and Kadazan)	Sabah Publishing House	15,000 copies
2. Sabah Times (in English, Bahasa and Kadazan)	Syarikat Sabah Times Sdn. Bhd. (Pemodalan Bumiputra Sabah, Syarikat Donson, Datuk Herman Luping.	14,000 copies
3. Asia Times (in Chinese)	Encik Tiong Tan Hua/ Encik Chong Fook Loi	16,000 copies

4.	Sandakan Jih Pao (in Chinese)	Lampayan Palung Sdn Bhd. Mr. Chong Fook Loi	13,500 copies
5.	Overseas Chinese Daily News (in Chinese)	Sabah Publishing House	12,500 copies
6.	Merdeka Daily News (in Chinese)	Datuk Khoo Thau Choon	11,500 copies
7.	Morning Post (in Chinese)	Hiew Min Yong	06,000 copies
8.	Sabah Shi Pao (in Chinese)	Syarikat Sabah Times	03,000 copies
9.	Borneo Mail (in Bahasa and English)	N/A	10,000 copies
10.	Borneo Bulletin (in English)	Brunei Press Ltd.	N/A
11.	New Straits Times (in English)	New Straits Times Press (Malaysia)	4,300 copies
12.	Berita Harian (in Bahasa)	"	5,500 copies
13.	New Sunday Times (in English)	"	N/A
14.	Berita Minggu (in Bahasa)	New Straits Times Press (Malaysia)	N/A
15.	Utusan Malaysia (in Bahasa)	Utusan Melayu Group	4,000 copies
16.	Mingguan Malaysia (in Bahasa)	"	N/A
17.	The Star (in English)	N/A	5,000 copies
18.	Sunday Star	N/A	N/A

Note: Not Available (N/A)